

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONSUMER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ADVERGAMES

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Abstract: *Internet technology, as well as development of mobile phone was fast adopted by people for recreational, economical and business reasons. The web-based technology development and the new communication systems made marketers to orientate their promotional campaigns and efforts towards new ways of reaching their actual and potential client. They started to use new and innovative ways to get public's interest and to encourage purchase. In this context, Internet offered a complex environment to support the development of innovative brand strategies. One of the emerging new techniques in advertising is advergaming. Advergaming represent the use of video game interactive technology for delivering brand messages to public. They are electronic games accessible on companies own websites, on social media sites and on application which can be downloaded on mobile devices. For marketers is important to understand the way that advergaming work and what consumer's attitude towards this practice is. The formation of attitude depends on a series of factors which are common to all types of advertisements based on Internet technology. These factors responsible for consumers' attitude towards online advertising and implicit for attitude formation over advergaming are informative component, source credibility, entertainment, and irritation. Beside these four elements, there are additional criterions which consumers use for evaluating advertising in video games: the viral component, interactivity and telepresence. For marketers it is important to understand these factors and to find practical ways for using them for a better brand communication and for higher results of advertising campaigns which include the use of advergaming as part of the promotional strategy. The present paper is looking to make a description of the factors influencing consumer's attitude formation towards advergaming, in conjunction with the Internet environment and the specific features of this media channel. The presentation of the relevant factors is based on the fundamental elements defining consumer's attitude and it's particularities in online environment.*

Keywords: consumer's attitude, video games, advertising, advergaming, online

JEL Classification: M37

1. Introduction

Today advertising is a complex business and with the improvement of Internet technology, the environment and landscape of business changed very much from what was like in the past. New techniques in communication and public targeting include studies for understanding consumers' behavioral characteristics and to help satisfying their needs. Among these studies, consumer's attitude has an important role.

More scholars and researchers become interested in understanding consumers set of actions, and become an aspect very large studied including development of efficient strategies used in influencing decisions made by consumers (Blackwell et al, 2001).

The Internet proved to be a good alternative to traditional media like television, radio and magazines for promoting products and services. The continuous increase of web traffic made advertisers orientate their advertising campaigns to online environment, and determined researchers to intensively investigate the online potential, for understanding and better use of the advantages offered by the Internet. Internet technology, as well as development of mobile phone was fast adopted by people for recreational, economical and business reasons. The latest models of communication offered companies new ways of reaching their clients and provided new ways for promoting their brands and products (Pelău and Zegreanu, 2010). The new online techniques received higher attention from the public, determining the change of the new media consumption patterns and making people to orientate to online environments (Drury, 2008).

Online advertising includes several forms, which could be understood in bigger classes as e-mail advertising, text, display advertising and online video advertising (Varnali, 2012). Among the last category, advergaming started to be a common practice in the new marketing context.

Advergaming represent the use of gaming interactive technology for delivering brand advertising messages to public. Advergaming is a technique of incorporating brands and product directly into the game environment. They are electronic games accessible on companies own websites, on social media sites and on application which can be downloaded on mobile devices. Some authors consider that under the generic name of advergaming are "commercial messages embedded within the content of retail, accessible video games, online electronic games or apps" (Dahl et al, 2009). Advergaming are an efficient medium connected to Internet offering telepresence, immersion, accessibility and replaying ability.

2. Elements defining consumers' attitude

Consumers' attitudinal structures were found to be similar both for traditional and Internet based advertising (Schlosser et al., 1999). The consistency of this structure is in accordance with other findings regarding the resemblance between traditional and Internet advertising with respect to entertainment and information value perceived by consumers. The studies about consumers' perception over advertising showed that factors specific for traditional media are also relevant for web based advertising (Chen and Wells, 1999).

Attitude can be defined as an emotional, rational and mental predisposition regarding a person, an object or a fact. In marketing, consumers' attitude studies are a part of

behavioral studies and imply the definition of reactions towards important attributes of brands, products, services and markets.

In literature, attitude was defined as “a learned predisposition of human beings” (Fishbein, 1967) or a “predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion” (Lutz, 1985).

More recent definitions considered attitude as a person’s position of being favorable or unfavorable, positive or negative, for or against a particular object (Loudon and Della Bitta, 1993). Kotler (2000) defined attitude based on the concept of human learned disposition. He developed this concept and considered attitude as being an expression of the individual personal evolution, an action tendency and an emotional feeling towards some objects or ideas. Some authors (Solomon et al, 2002) state that attitude is a long-lasting and common assessment of people, towards objects, oneself, other people, advertisement and any given problem. Other authors considered attitude as a predisposition to behave in a consistently favorable or unfavorable way with respect to a given object or a constant tendency to behave accordingly in a concrete situation, regarding a certain object or a group of objects (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004).

The formation of attitude depends on a series of factors: knowledge, learning, information, education, thinking, experience, lifestyle, predisposition, belief, faith or communication. It could generally be translated in good or bad, positive or negative, optimistic or pessimistic, friendly or unfriendly. Attitudes could be consistent, could change due to external factors, could be influenced by some contextual elements, or could influence attitude of other persons.

Summarizing, attitude can be understood as a particular system of motivations, emotions, perceptual and cognitional processes, responding to certain environmental aspects, surrounding an individual.

Consumers’ attitude is a composite of consumers’ beliefs, feelings and behavioral intentions towards a certain brand, product or service. A consumer might have positive or negative beliefs about an object, as well as he could be neutral, depending on the context or the person. In some situations, the same person could have contradictory beliefs about a brand, being also positive about it in some situations, and negative in other situations. Starting from these beliefs, a consumer could develop certain feelings towards a brand or product. In accordance with these feelings, a consumer will manifest behavioral intention directed to a specific brand.

3. Elements specific for online advertising which influence consumers’ attitude over advergames

Literature about advertising considers that there are several factors which are responsible for consumers’ attitude towards online advertising: informative component, source credibility, entertainment and irritation. Beside these four elements, there are additional criterions that consumers use when they evaluate advertising from video games: the viral component, interactivity and telepresence.

Literature (Ducoffe, 1995; 1996) confirmed that attitude towards online advertisement is dependent on the perceived value of advertisement and the level of entertainment, information and intrusiveness. The author also described that these three factors determine consumers’ evaluation of the ad and the attitude towards it.

Researchers tried to explain the relation between the level of advertising persuasion and the consumer's reaction towards it, founding that this is directly related to consumer's preference for advertising in general, values of enjoyment and entertainment, the informational content value, the perception about the credibility and truthfulness of the source (James and Kover, 1992; Mehta, 2000).

3.1 The informative component

Informative component of an advert refers to the quantity and quality of data relevant for the brand or product, which describes its particularities, properties, special characteristics and the way it could be used. This component has impact on consumers as it helps them in decision making process and purchase (Tsang et al., 2004). This factor is also important for determining the efficiency of an advertisement. It helps in making consumers be aware of a product, and informs them about the features that make it better and more attractive than competitors' offers (Saadeghvaziri and Hosseini, 2011).

Advergames can incorporate interactive branded objects which can help users to understand the particular characteristics and the usage of a product or service during a game session. From this perspective, the information provided through an advergame can be more complete and relevant for consumers than watching a TV commercial or seeing an online banner.

The specific structure of a video game encourages players to repeat the game experience by replaying the game. This fact leads to minimal risk of forgetting the information and message about the products advertised in the game. From the cognitive perspective, replaying the game helps in bringing the brand or product in the preference set of the consumer and may increase loyalty.

3.2 Source credibility

Some authors (Ducoffe, 1996) consider that the attitude towards an advertisement can be related to the attitude towards the environment that contains it and the consumers' perceived value of that advertising. As an example, authors said that adverts placed in a medium like newspapers are more trusted and perceived as more credible and informative, than those placed in a medium as television, considered less informative and reliable, (Bauer and Greyser, 1968; Becker et al., 1976; Larkin, 1979). For web based advertisement, this means that a consumer may accept the web as a tool with multi-functional characteristics, but could have a different attitude towards the advertising in this medium.

There are multiple factors that influence the credibility of an advertisement, like the general credibility of the brand and company, as well as the context and the channels used for transmitting the brand message to public. Authors think that a higher credibility of the source leads to a higher value of the advertisements and higher impact of the message over consumers (Haghirian et al. 2005).

The original purpose of video games was to entertain and relax the public, and put them in a position less credible. Today instead, video games can be used for practical purposes, as they could employ practical benefits to their purpose of recreation. Compared to classic video games, there are new categories of games named serious games, which include, beside their basic purpose, a utilitarian purpose. These categories of video games include: educational games, training games, simulation games and advertising games. In other words, serious games are

characterized by a utilitarian and educational scenario, which exist in a combination with the entertainment scenario.

Serious games created for advertising, like advergames, have the purpose of promoting particular brands or products during game sessions. This approach differentiates advergames from normal video games, and can be perceived as more credible by consumers.

3.3 Entertainment

The feelings of enjoyment connected to advertisement have an important role in determining consumers' attitude towards online adverts. It is considered that entertainment services brings an additional value for consumers and could lead to an increased loyalty, as well as a positive attitude (Saadeghvaziri and Hosseini, 2011). For online advertising, entertainment component helps in predicting online advertisements efficiency and is an important factor which determines the positive attitude in web based and mobile advertisements (Tsang et al., 2004; Bauer et al., 2005). These facts have great importance for advergames, which are design both for computer and mobile phones.

One of the most important features of advergames is the entertainment value offered. This can block the natural forgetfulness of a brand experience specific to advertisements. Players can see the billboard, the interactive branded objects or characters from the game while they play and reach game goals.

In today market, when audiences get easily distracted, loose interest, show indifference and are difficult to captivate, combining entertaining with advertising features seems to be an effective practice. While other Medias as television seem to fail in retaining publics' attention, advergames are a good way to gain consumer's interest and awareness.

Several authors consider that advergames are a unique way of branded entertainment because it is produced for a specific sponsoring brand and contains promotional messages directed towards the same product. Compared to other forms of advertising like product placements and insertions, the entire game is in fact a brand message (Chen and Ringel, 2001; Deal, 2005).

The possibility of creating advertising with entertaining content using an advergence is a form of branded entertainment which incorporates in its essence a hybrid brand message. In this way, advergames allow marketers to have control over the context they deliver the entertaining message and provide a very high level of conducting promotional campaigns. It can present a brand's message "in an engaging manner at a fraction of the cost of television advertising" (Bertrim, 2005). It can be said that advergames are a direct form of branded entertainment delivered more efficiently than other advertising methods.

The most recent study on this matter (Marti-Parreño et al., 2013) investigated if the entertainment of an advergence has positive influence over consumer's attitude towards a brand integrated in the advergence. For the investigation, the authors applied a questioner with 19 items to a sample of 100 students from a University in Spain. The answers were designed on a seven-point Likert scale, ranked from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

The result showed that attitude towards advergames is positive connected to the consumers feeling of being entertained by the advergence. These findings also supported previous research, showing that attitude towards advertising follows

similar rules for advergames as for other media as web-based technology (Lou, 2002; Chen and Wells, 1999), advertising in general (Ducoffe, 1996) and online computer games (Gao, 2004).

3.4 Irritation

Many advertisers adopted intrusive tactics for getting consumers' interest and attention, but most of the time these tactics are perceived as being annoying (Zhang, 2000). Numerous studies revealed a negative attitude of consumers regarding advertising (Alwitt and Prabhaker, 1994). Authors (Ducoffe, 1996) pointed out that in the moment of exposure most of the messages are not related to consumers' immediate interests and needs. Therefore, they dismiss these messages. These facts made advertisers find new strategies that could help in reaching the targeted public, as well as adapting old practices used in traditional environments as television and billboards to interactive media as Internet.

When consumers face invasive and repetitive advertisements tend to react with negative feelings as irritation and annoyance. Compared to other media, advergames are more consumer' friendly because advertisements are exposed in the background during certain games, a practice that is more accepted by consumers (Ipe, 2008). Authors (Kretchmer, 2004) think that advergames are more effective than online banners because of the "growing cynicism about banner advertisements" while in advergames the product is present in the background or as part of a character of the interactive game.

The same study mentioned above (Marti-Parreño et al., 2013) also investigated the connection between attitude towards advergames and consumers irritation. Authors pointed out that irritation is a sensation produced by the brand abusive appearance in the advergame content, which could trigger anxiety, poor game experience and disrupt player's attention from the game play. The study showed that if the presence of the brand is too intrusive and unsuitable or the role of the brand in the game is not justified by the game action, the attitude towards that brand will become negative. These facts support Gao's (2004) findings that "the design of a game that annoys, offends or insults the intelligence of the audience can cause irritation and can negatively affect attitude toward the brand".

4. Particular elements which influence consumers' attitude towards advergames

4.1 The viral component

Many brands started to use viral marketing for promotional purposes, determining in this way an increased popularity of this method (Eckler and Bolls, 2011). Compared to conventional media, this method helps to better target people and to deliver personalized messages. It also offers potential for quantify the speed of message transmission and the consumers' reaction and response (Bampo et al., 2008).

A good impression and a positive attitude towards an advergame will reflect in a positive evaluation of the brand or product advertised in the game. The repetitive nature of the game produces a higher remembering rate as the frequency will influence the chance of retaining the players' attention with the brand exposure and message deliverance.

Advergaming can be used as a viral marketing tool, their structure permitting players to share the game experience and talk about them with friends and family. Advergaming has a “tell-a-friend” viral component making players be more engaged with the game and more aware of the brand and product presented in the scenario. Besides remembering the brand, if the advergaming is popular and fun players will associate the game’s characteristics with the brand.

4.2 Interactivity

Traditional media is characterized by a one-way communication system which makes consumers to accept the message from the source without any possibility of control. Compared to this, advergaming allows people to voluntarily and constantly take action, by actively searching and choosing the game they want to play, to replay it and repeat the experience on the game and implicitly with the product or service advertised within. Consequently, the non-linear structure of the interactive advergaming influences consumers’ experience with the brand.

Interactivity is considered the possibility to modify the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Steuer, 1992). It was also defined as “an expression of the extent that, in a given series of communication exchanges, any third transmission is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (Rafaeli, 1997)

When a consumer interacts with an advertisement, the relevance of the ad, the importance of information, and current needs will influence the consumers’ general involvement with the ad.

The structure of the interactivity on new media includes a dimension defined by Liu (2001) as active control, freedom of choice, two-way communication and synchronicity. Internet technology enhances consumer’s interactive experience, allowing them more freedom in choosing the type of information they search and the moment when to receive it. The interactive communication through advergaming eliminates physical, temporal and spatial barriers in a way that traditional media is unable to do.

For video games, telepresence is a dimension given by interactivity and vividness of the virtual environment. Telepresence refers to consumers feeling of being mediated in the virtual environment. Players’ sensation of being present in the video game world is enhanced by the number of senses that are incorporated within the game, including visual and audio effects, and leads to a higher level of telepresence. Authors (Cook and Coupey, 1998) explained that environments with video, text and sound elements offer a good context for decision making, increasing consumers’ experience with the promoted brand. From an advergaming perspective, telepresence is important only if it helps the consumer to get involved in the game and to feel immersed in the virtual environment.

Vividness is considered to be the richness of the virtual environment and it depends on the game’s technical characteristics. Authors (Steuer 1992) first described the factors that best describe vividness as depending on the number of sensory dimensions presented in the game and the depth of these sensors, including visual and audio as the most important sensors.

An important study on interactivity and its most relevant attribute, telepresence, was conducted in 2010. The authors (Hussein et al., 2010) investigated the way that

video games which created the feeling of telepresence and the way that interactivity created product experience affected consumers' purchase intention.

The study was conducted over a sample of 250 undergraduate students from University Sains Malaysia who volunteered for the laboratory research. The experiment was designed to ensure the cause and effect relation between persuasive actions of the video game and the respondent manifested intentions. The respondents answered immediately after a game session to a questionnaire structured in three main sections, designed for collecting demographic data, telepresence data and purchase intention data. The answers were designed on a five-point Likert scale.

The results indicated that the relation between experience with the product induced by telepresence and purchase intention is significant. This fact has proved that attitudes formed in a mediated environment influence the behavioral intention in the real world, as purchase.

Authors pointed out that telepresence offers important contribution to understanding the perception of product presented in mediated environment and the game player's way of understanding the product experience and the particular persuasive messages, concluding that telepresence is an important driver of players purchase intention.

5. Conclusions

This study presents the basic elements that describe the formation of attitude based on consumer's experience with a video game containing advertising elements. The product experience can be mediated through an advergame where advertisers have the possibility to control players' perception through advertising actions.

Marketers who plan to use advergames as part of their promotional strategy have to first understand the players' preferences and expectation from a video game. They have to design a game content that will engage consumers and will create positive feelings towards the brand or product presented in that particular game. They should integrate the brand in a way that would not distract player from the game play and avoid in this way players' irritation. Also, it is important to create content by using symbols, objects, characters and messages that makes the game space environment more fun and attractive.

When a firm uses advergames it should be careful to produce creative content, to engage consumer in the virtual space of the game and to increase entertainment possibilities of the advergame. As game players are subjective, advertisers should give special attention to consumers' expectation and preference.

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